

# News

## Students' religious beliefs evolve, persist on the Hill

By Allison Eck '12

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No Hallelujahs on the Hill? Think again.

Hamilton, like many other liberal arts colleges, is home to many students who, perhaps contrary to their outward appearance or to what they publicly profess, are religious or spiritual on some level. The tendency to keep faith private, though, is not Hamilton-specific — personal reflection becomes more critical at a time when new ideas are coming at you from all directions.

In a Spectator survey sent to seniors regarding how the college experience changes one's belief system, respondents acknowledged that this tide of spiritual reconsideration likely sweeps over most young people when they reach a certain age. But it shouldn't be mistaken for a complete loss of faith.

"The more you pursue a higher education, the more likely you are to abandon your faith — at least that's what conventional wisdom holds," wrote Inside Higher Ed editor Scott Jaschik in 2007.

So when Republican presidential candidate Rick Santorum declared on Jan. 25 that American colleges and universities strip young people of their faith, media outlets retorted with citations of surveys proving otherwise. Specifically, sociology research done at the University of Texas at Austin in 2007 showed that while young adults generally become less religious across the board, the decline is greater among students who don't attend college.

A seemingly piecemeal collection of events for any individual may have religious ramifications; Hamilton seniors attribute their change in faith (or lack thereof) to a wide range of factors: distance from home or from their place of worship, aging, or altered family dynamics. No matter what the cause, though, development of a healthy, questioning mindset is important to students transitioning into adulthood.

A substantial number of students characterized themselves as less religious and more spiritual now that they have gone through almost four years at Hamilton. They say they feel more in touch with an individual conception of faith, even if they don't regularly practice. And they feel more philosophical as a result of their studies.

"After I took a philosophy course named Critical Reasoning, I became much more cognizant of the logical fallacies that preachers—like all other types of orators—often use to urge the members of their congregations to obey certain religious guidelines," said Woodger Faugas '12. "Although this course did not directly cause me to change my religious beliefs, I started to question all of the teachings that I had been exposed to all of my life as a Christian."

Others had the opposite reaction. Sarah D. '12 became more attuned to Christianity, having not grown up in a Christian household. "Hamilton gave me the opportunity to practice Christianity and discuss Christian thought, theology, and ideas more freely than I had previously," she said. "I believe my Christian worldview

has transformed the way I think about my life's effect on others — while I have been at Hamilton, I have thought considerably about how to live a sustainable, other-honoring life.”

Visiting Associate Professor of Religious Studies Brent Rodriguez-Plate explained that in academia, this struggle is deemed “faith development,” and it was first purported from a psychological standpoint by social scientist James Fowler. Plate says that college is a time (for educated middle-upper class) people to explore new ways of behaving, thinking and being.

“Importantly, there can be a lot of pain involved as students separate out from everything they thought they knew, and the families who are attached to that past,” he said. “The struggle by the end if college is: where does the person fit in? Feeling that he or she can’t go back to the old way leaves a big vacuum for something new. I think that often times students graduate somewhere in this limbo and do not have the best tools for how to seek something new and meaningful.”

And professors have an interesting role to play in that process. “We arm students with a critical edge, which is vital,” Plate said. “But we don’t always do such a good job of helping find ways for students to put pieces of the puzzle together again.”

Thomas Cheeseman ’12 says Professor of History Douglas Ambrose was a positive influence in this regard. “My experience at Hamilton has pushed me towards a real understanding of religion. I was raised Roman Catholic, but by the time Confirmation came around I was wholly disillusioned by the whole Church,” he said. “It was into my second semester freshman year that I fell, by accident, back into Christianity. The questions of faith posed by my mentor and friend Professor Ambrose at the Christopher Dawson Society deeply troubled me. Where did I ground my values?”

Some students feel a greater comfort being amongst like-minded peers; organizations like Hillel, the Muslim Student Association (MSA) and the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship are warm and welcoming communities for such students.

“Although we are a small campus harboring an even smaller religious body, the fact that some people somewhere can learn to live together despite differences in faith gives me hope for the rest of the world,” said Tani Leigh ’12, a member of the MSA. “Now I am no longer ashamed to want to define myself as a believer of a certain or even multiple faiths.”

“I realized that I prefer to handle my spirituality on my own,” concluded Emily Gaudet ’12. “I’m much happier this way.”



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